

Abbas Kiarostami's Contribution's to the Iranian New Wave Cinema

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### Abbas Kiarostami's Contribution's to the Iranian New Wave Cinema

Abbas Kiarostami is undoubtedly one of the finest filmmakers to come out of Iran. His earliest medium of artistic expression was painting and he majored in graphic design at the University of Tehran. (Zeitgeist Films Ltd, 2007) After graduating in the 1960s he started working in the advertising sector and Kiarostami shot about 150 advertisements for the Iranian government. In the latter half of the 1960s Kiarostami started designing credit titles for films in Iran which themselves were going through a shift. (Zeitgeist Films Ltd, 2007) He ended up becoming a filmmaker and set up the filmmaking department at the Institute for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults. He also made his first ever film, *The Bread and Alley* in 1972 at the Institute. (Zeitgeist Films Ltd, 2007) In 1987, Kiarostami shot the first film of the Koker trilogy, *Where Is the Friend's Home?* Films that followed were *Life and Nothing More* in 1992 and *Through the Olive Trees* in 1994. In the last decade of the millennium, he made his magnum opus *Taste of Cherry* which won him the Palme d'Or at the 1997 Cannes Film Festival (Cannes 1997, n.d.). In the 2000s, Kiarostami turned his attention to making more and more experimental films and also trying out shooting digitally. In the last years of his life, he shot *Certified Copy* in 2010 (which was the first film of his to be shot outside Iran) and *Like Someone in Love* which was set in Japan.

### **History of cinema in Iran**

Iran was actually one of the first countries in the world to get exposed to the medium of film. The emperor Mozaffar ad-Din Shah Qajar, the fifth Shah or King of the Qajar Dynasty ordered his royal photographer Mirza Ebrahim Khan Akkas Bashi to purchase the cinematograph after being introduced to it at the Paris Exhibition in 1900 essentially making Mirza Ebrahim Khan Akkas Bashi the first Persian/Iranian filmmaker. The 'first' Iranian/Persian film was the

Shah's visit to Belgium. (Mehrabi, 2007) The state of Iranian cinema was riding a difficult wave due to the dissolution of the Qajar dynasty and a transition to the Pahlavi dynasty. In 1925, when the political situation in the country improved, Ovanes Ohanian founded the first Iranian film school in 1925. (Omid, 1995) In 1930, Ovanes Ohanian made the first feature length Iranian film called *Abi and Rabi*. And 3 years later in 1933, the first Iranian sound film *Lor Girl* was made. Slowly and gradually, the film scene of Iran grew as filmmakers started adapting classical Persian literature and Persian mythology into films.

### **Persian Film or Filmfarsi**

Before the Iranian New Wave could develop into a cinematic movement, the cinema of Iran was in a very eccentric state. One of the 'genres' or the styles of filmmaking that came out of this period was called *Filmfarsi*. These were films that were replicas of cheap and poorly made Bollywood films which were spiced up with dances and songs. (Talattof, 2011). After the revolution, *Filmfarsi* was heavily suppressed by the new government as it showed relationships between men and women also had elements of vulgarity in it. It was this suppression of *Filmfarsi* that accelerated the Iranian New Wave notions to develop.

### **Iranian New Wave**

After the songs and dance routines of the *Filmfarsi* were clamped down by the Pahlavi regime as it imposed very severe economic and social restrictions on the society. Feroz Farrokhzad made her short documentary *The House Is Black* based on a Leper colony in Iran where Feroz Farrokhzad recites verses from the Old Testament, the Quran and her own poetry

too. The film focuses on the experience of living in a leper colony and the notion of human beauty. This film has been called the precursor of the Iranian New Wave.<sup>1</sup>

The Iranian New Wave cinema movement started with Hajir Darioush's *Serpent's Skin* in 1969. Darioush next two films were documentaries which explored the social structure of Iran namely *But Problems Arose* in 1965 and *Face 75*. The films that followed were *The Cow* by Dariush Mehrjui and *Qeysar* in by Masoud Kimiai for which Abbas Kiarostami made the credit titles for. Bahram Beyzai's film *Downpour*, Sohrab Shahid Saless's *A Simple Event* and *Still Life* followed in 1971, 1973 and 1974 respectively. Almost all of these films had political, philosophical connotations and a sense of poetic storytelling. This marked the end of the First Iranian New Wave.

The Second Iranian New Wave includes the films made after the Iranian Revolution of 1979 which overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty and installed Ayatollah Khomeini as the leader of the State. The new regime had very conservative views about arts and hence more and more restrictions were placed on artists. Many Iranian artists left the country as a form of self-exile as they felt suffocated in the new conservative and oppressive environment. Under these restrictions, a new breed of filmmakers was born who made films who explored different aspects of the human life and did not pay much heed to making films that showed huge conflicts (such as war films or combat scenes), films that showed a false image of Iran, films that only presented bourgeoisie class or building grand sets, using fancy cinematography and lighting or employing the state-of-the-art cameras and other equipment. Instead, they turned the cameras inwards; started building narratives that were relevant on a human basis and to whom everyone could connect to used real life locations (most set in the rural areas of Iran), went back to the drawing

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<sup>1</sup> [The House Is Black](#)

board and used the basics of cinematography to construct beautifully composed shots, and used whatever cinematic equipment was available in the country.

The Iranian New Wave was also inspired by the Italian cinema movement of 1940s and 1950s called the Italian neorealism. The movement's films explored the post-World War II Italy in terms of its social and economic changes and how Italians dealt with poverty, injustice, oppression and desperation. Frequent and recurring themes were using non-actors, shooting on actual locations (often using post World War II dilapidated buildings and areas), and a focus on the working-class people and their struggles in order to survive. The films were also observational in a sense where working class people were shown doing mundane jobs and also feature children in many main leading roles.

### **Characteristics of the Iranian New Wave**

Following are some of the characteristics of the Iranian New Wave:

- Shooting the scenes realistically or in a documentary style. Portraying the absolute truth about a particular setting, or a character. No extra "glamor-ification".
- Poetic or emblematic manner of storytelling in which references to earlier works or to classical Persian literature is made.
- The use of child actors/protagonists in many of the films. This was a reaction or to comment on the prohibition of relationships on screen. Not even a hug is allowed on screen.
- Turning the camera inwards or adopting a reflexive style of filmmaking. This style is usually applied in documentary filmmaking. The narrative is structured in such a way that the audience assumes the filmmaker, the process of filmmaking, and the final film are one coherent product.

- Focusing on the rural localities of Iran. Narratives were built around characters from the rural proletariat class which most cinema goers could relate to on a humanistic level.
- Absence of the “male gaze”. This element was included as a way to exhibit women emancipation and to challenge the existing status quo and stereotypes about women in the country.

### **The “Kiarostamian” Style**

Abbas Kiarostami had a very distinct style of filmmaking. Some critics and theorists have termed this the “Kiarostamian” style. His shots were simple yet effective. His camera and actor blocking were as natural as possible to sort of “hide” the camera and to give the audience a very immersive experience. While other directors worked to execute intricate and complex action or chase scenes, he would rather use the basics of his cinematography arsenal to effectively communicate his message. In an interview, he said “I don’t like to arouse the viewer emotionally or give him advice. I don’t like to belittle him burden him with a sense of guilt. Those are the things I don’t like in a movie.”<sup>2</sup> (Kiarostami, Taste Of Cherry, 1997) Kiarostami also used a lot of long shots especially in the closing sequences of his films as if to invite the audience to reflect and think about the characters’ fate. While the long shot was being played out, the audio and the dialogue was kept in the foreground (in terms of audio mixing). This technique is at play in Taste of Cherry where Badii is driving around the outskirts of Tehran and the audio can be heard clearly as if it coming from nearby. This along with compositions using the compositional rule of “frame within frame” by placing subjects through windows or doors of cars builds suspense in dull moments.

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<sup>2</sup> [Abbas Kiarostami discusses his directorial style](#)

The style of Kiarostami has been compared to filmmakers such as the Indian parallel filmmaker Satyajit Ray and the Italian Neorealist master Vittorio De Sica for their individualistic styles as well.

Kiarostami also switched from the traditional 35mm film stock to digital video at the start of the millennium. The first time Kiarostami used digital video was with ABC Africa in 2001. He travelled to a refugee camp in Kampala, Uganda to scout and research for a feature length documentary film with his assistant at the request of the United Nations. When they returned back home, they had 20 hours of footage which they deemed enough to be edited into a documentary. (Bergala, 2006) According to Kiarostami, "Digital video is within the reach of anybody, like a ballpoint pen. I'd even dare to predict that within the next decade, we'll see a burst of interest in film-making as a consequence of the impact of video". (Diba Festival, 2007)

### **Spirituality in Abbas Kiarostami's Work**

Many of Kiarostami's films have an element of spirituality to them. The way he deals with life and death (or sometimes the connection between them in *Taste of Cherry*), reflexive films like *Close Up* provide a look into the creative process of the film and merge the lines between what is the "actual film" footage or what is a "behind the scenes" interview footage, in the second film of the Koker trilogy *Life, and Nothing More...* the relationship between the audience and the characters is explored by breaking the 4th wall and experimenting with a newer form of filmmaking (sometimes called docufiction) in which the journey of Kiarostami to the region of Koker is fictionalized and is given a new twist in terms of storytelling. In his 1999 film, *The Wind Will Carry Us*, Kiarostami has explored the boundaries of metaphysics and how metaphysics can be presented via the medium of film. For the usage of spirituality in his films, he has been compared to the Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky and the French minimalist

filmmaker Robert Bresson. Asked to comment on spirituality in his films and who works in a similar fashion, he said "Hou Hsiao-Hsien is one. Tarkovsky's works separate me completely from physical life, and are the most spiritual films I have seen--what Fellini did in parts of his movies, bringing dream life into film, he does as well. Theo Angelopoulos's movies also find this type of spirituality at certain moments. In general, I think movies and art should take us away from daily life, should take us to another state, even though daily life is where this flight is launched from. This is what gives us comfort and peace. The time for Scheherazade and the King-the storytelling time-is over." (Sterritt, 2000)

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